



Brave New World and The Tempest

Author(s): Ira Grushow

Source: *College English*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Oct., 1962), pp. 42-45

Published by: [National Council of Teachers of English](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/373846>

Accessed: 18/09/2011 05:32

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



National Council of Teachers of English is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *College English*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Brave New World and The Tempest

IRA GRUSHOW

In *Brave New World* Aldous Huxley enforces in us disgust toward the future society largely through constant reference to our own society. We find the World State intolerable largely because we see in it perversions of our most cherished ideals and institutions. Their proverbs ("The more stitches the less riches") are refutations of our own ("A stitch in time saves nine") and their Solidarity Service is a travesty of Christian ritual.

Parody and allusion extend to our literary heritage as well. In a brilliant *tour de force* at the beginning of Chapter Five, Huxley translates Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* into the terms of Fordian society. The sound of curfew becomes the announcement over the loud speakers of the closing for the day of the Stoke Poges Club House, the lowing herd is the cattle of the Internal and External Secretion Trust, and the beetle's droning flight is the incessant buzzing of helicopters. The meditation on death in the *Elegy* is frighteningly paralleled by the dialogue between Henry Foster and Lenina Crowne on the physico-chemical equality of all men and on the contribution to society after death of even the lowest of Epsilons in the form of phosphorus pentoxide, recoverable from their cremated bodies. Our shock at realizing the violation of one of the most famous and beloved poems of our language assures us once more that we want no part of the Brave New World.

Allusions to Shakespeare are the most frequent in the book. The Savage speaks,

Mr. Grushow, an English instructor at Franklin and Marshall College, taught at Carnegie Institute of Technology, where this article was written.

we realize, very largely in quotations from Shakespeare, one of the principal sources of his education. The contrast between his poetically inspired ideas and Lenina's hypnopaedically instilled maxims serves to point up linguistically the great gulf which separates their two worlds. John is not simply a well-read savage, however: Shakespeare's morality has invaded his consciousness. It is not by accident that the book of plays opens to Hamlet's denunciation of his mother. John identifies himself with the young prince, and he sees in Linda's liaison with Popé a re-enactment of the incestuous union of Gertrude and Claudius. Later in *Brave New World* in his frenzied attacks upon lechery John identifies himself with Othello and Lear.

These references are for the most part casual; they are more ornamental than functional; they display the author's ingenuity, but they cannot be said to constitute a pattern of sustained allusion. One play of Shakespeare's, however, *The Tempest*, bears a more intimate relationship to *Brave New World* than the others. Huxley has taken his title, of course, from Miranda's exclamation upon meeting the party of the King of Naples, the first men other than her father Prospero and her betrothed Ferdinand whom she has ever seen:

O wonder!

How many goodly creatures are there here!

How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,

That has such people in't!

John Savage repeats these words several times in the course of the novel, first when he learns that Bernard Marx intends to take him back with him to civilization. As in Shakespeare (Alonso,

Sebastian, and Antonio are, after all, plotters, usurpers, and would-be assassins) the words "O brave new world!" are ironic. John, no less than Miranda, is in for a few surprises when he gets to civilization. His education has not prepared him for the world outside the reservation, just as Miranda's education, one feels strangely apprehensive, may not be wholly adequate for a princess of Naples. Huxley's book may be said to begin where Shakespeare's play leaves off. Just as W. H. Auden, in *The Sea and the Mirror*, has explored the thoughts and feelings of the characters of *The Tempest* on their boat trip from the enchanted island back to Naples, so Huxley treats of the reaction of John Savage, a type of Miranda, to the world of "civilized" men and women.

The irony of John's exclamation, "O brave new world," pervades the whole relationship of Huxley's novel to Shakespeare's play, and even after the reader has accepted the fact of reference to *The Tempest*, he may not readily see the identifications that Huxley makes. It is not immediately apparent, for example, that Bernard Marx represents Caliban, the deformed monster and unwilling slave of Prospero, described by his master as "a devil, a born devil, on whose nature/ Nurture can never stick; on whom my pains,/ Humanely taken, are all lost, quite lost." But the resemblance is unmistakable. Like Caliban's, Marx's questionable birth, or decanting, is against him, his physical deformity breeds discontent and rebellion, and his education or conditioning has failed to produce its desired results. "You taught me language," Caliban upbraids his master, "and my profit on't/ Is, I know how to curse; the red plague rid you,/ For learning me your language!" So might Bernard Marx rail against the hypnopaedic instruction he has been subjected to. Again, like Caliban, Marx takes part in an unsuccessful insurrection, and, terrified of his mas-

ter's wrath, he abjectly begs for mercy when the plot is discovered.

If Marx is Caliban, then who is the Savage? We have already established that one of his functions in the novel is to play the role that Miranda might have in a sequel to *The Tempest*. He is the innocent suddenly brought into an evil world. But as Lenina's virtuous lover he identifies himself with Ferdinand as well. Like Ferdinand's, John's sorrow for the loss of a parent is gradually displaced by a love which is not filial. Like Ferdinand, John believes in taking a bride, not for the asking, but by winning her through the accomplishment of some arduous task. He quotes Ferdinand to the effect that "some kinds of baseness/ Are nobly undergone." And again like Ferdinand, John is committed to strict chastity before marriage. At one point the Savage quotes Prospero's injunction to Ferdinand:

If thou dost break her virgin knot before
All sanctimonious ceremonies may
With full and holy rite be minister'd
No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let
fall
To make this contract grow. . . .

John also quotes Ferdinand's assurance that

The most opportune place, the strong'st
suggestion
Our worser genius can, shall never melt
Mine honour into lust. . . .

It is, of course, one of the bitterest morsels of Huxley's irony that John can only speak for himself. If he represents Ferdinand, then Lenina must be Miranda. The measure of the difference between Shakespeare's fresh, innocent, intelligent virgin and Huxley's jaded, experienced, automated Alpha is the full measure of the difference between Shakespeare's vision of an ideal world and Huxley's. The confused exchange of dialogue between John and Lenina in the scene where she tries to seduce him once more enforces linguistically

the incompatibility of their two worlds.

If Lenina represents an unreluctant Miranda, then her father is Prospero. But a properly decanted female Alpha of A. F. 632 has no parent of either sex. As the law regards certain persons not progenitors as acting *in loco parentis*, however, so may we consider the Controller, Mustapha Mond, as a father-surrogate to Lenina and, indeed, to all under his care. Through his planning and coordination their generation has been brought about, and through his direction and supervision their conditioning has been effected. Moreover, like Prospero in the play, the Controller is the guiding figure in Huxley's novel: he knows what is going on at all times and he determines the fate of all those under his dominion. His wrath is fearful: just as Caliban cringes before Prospero, so does Marx before Mustapha Mond. But here again there is a gross distortion of character. Mond is a Prospero who has elected to stay in Milan, a Prospero who for the sake of security and worldly power has renounced his scientific studies. Given a choice (as in a sense Shakespeare's Prospero was) of getting on in the world or of continuing his quest for truth, Mond does not choose as Prospero does. And as in Shakespeare so in Huxley an island, remote from all commerce with the rest of the world, is the only escape open to the nonconforming thinker.

Some of the lesser themes of *The Tempest* also find their way into *Brave New World*. The society of A. F. 632 is not merely one of the future—it has idealistic pretensions, it is a utopia. It bears a number of resemblances to the ideal commonwealth described in *The Tempest*. In Act II Scene I Gonzalo, to beguile the sorrows of his king, diverts the company, by telling the others what he would do, had he "the plantation of this isle":

Gonz. I' the commonwealth I would by contraries

Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
Letters should not be known;
Riches, poverty,
And use of service, none; contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
No occupation; all men idle, all;
And women too, but innocent and pure;
No sovereignty,—

Seb. Yet he would be king on't.

Ant. The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the beginning.

Gonz. All things in common nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavour: treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,
Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people.

Seb. No marrying 'mong his subjects?

Ant. None, man; all idle; whores and knaves.

The World State realizes many of the provisions of Gonzalo's fanciful account, especially in its freedom from the economic and political trammels of common life. It is true that the abolition of labor is not a feature of the World State, although the technology is so far advanced that it is almost a possibility. However, as Mustapha Mond explains, the masses require a certain amount of work or else they would find their increased leisure unendurable. The World State is also not without sovereignty, but since the subjects have been predestined and conditioned for their roles in the state, physical restraint is unnecessary. The final exchange between Sebastian and Antonio is particularly revealing, for while in Shakespeare it is set forth as a *reductio ad absurdum* to shat-

ter Gonzalo's idle dream, in Huxley sexual promiscuity becomes one of the basic assumptions of Fordian civilization.

Caliban's plot, already mentioned, finds its parallel, too, in *Brave New World*. As in *The Tempest* there are three conspirators who attempt to overthrow the established order. In the play it is the wine saved from the shipwreck which gives Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo the false courage to rebel. In the novel it is soma which obliterates thought and action; administered to Bernard, Helmholtz, and John it soon dispels all their antisocial inclinations.

It should by now be apparent that in *Brave New World* Huxley has hardly written a *version* of *The Tempest* for a future or even a modern audience. For one thing, the basic identifications are constantly shifting. At times John Savage is Ferdinand and at others he is Miranda, for the novel is in part both an ironic repetition and an ironic continuation of Shakespeare's play. What is more important than demanding exact correspondences between the characters and incidents of play and novel is the recognition that *The Tempest* stands behind *Brave New World* for contrast. In effect Huxley rings constant variations upon the characters and themes of *The Tempest*.

To some this may appear as nothing more than a demonstration of Huxley's virtuosity, the charade of a litterateur, and it must be admitted that one may read *Brave New World* intelligently without being overwhelmed by its pattern of allusions to *The Tempest*. Yet the power of Shakespeare's play is such that it informs with additional meaning any literary work that comes near it. What distinguishes *The Tempest* (and indeed the other romances) from Shakespeare's earlier comedies is the fact that

it is open-ended. At the conclusion of the play evil is overcome and good seems to win the day. But in *The Tempest* there is the uneasy apprehension that, although evil is subdued, it has not been vanquished, and the certain realization that, although good is temporarily in the ascendancy, it has purchased this victory at a tremendous cost.

This is the problem posed by *The Tempest*. Prospero clearly triumphs—on the island. But when he returns to his dukedom, can he ever fully trust Antonio? Or can Alonso sit securely on his throne in Naples while his brother Sebastian is around? Virtue has no difficulty in surviving in isolation. On the island Prospero can thwart the murderer and the rebel. On the island. But when he leaves the island he leaves his power and magic behind.

This, it seems to me, is also the problem Huxley poses in *Brave New World*, and one which we may overlook by simply accepting John as a noble Savage. Certainly he is the most admirable character in the book, the one with whom we can most closely identify. He suffers humiliations, but not defeat on the reservation. The great challenge comes when he enters civilization. Stronger in his convictions than most of us, he is nevertheless vanquished in the World State. Is his code of morality any less obsolete (never mind how admirable it is) in our own world than it is in the *Brave New World*? This becomes the central question of the novel: Is this life of the spirit, of poetry, of pure science and of pure knowledge, of chastity, of human relations, of the sanctification of carnal pleasures—is this life, to which we are all so ostensibly devoted, viable in the common, everyday world?